**Lumpkin County Extension Service**

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PRESS RELEASE DATE: 1/6/10

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**Coffee for the Compost**

I hated coffee when I was a youngster. My dislike of coffee continued until the first winter I attended UGA. I had a chemistry lab the first period in the morning. My assigned seat at the cold marble topped lab table was right in front of a broken window. The cold winter wind whistled through that window and chilled me to the bone. Although the University could build two multi-million dollar buildings on campus that quarter they somehow couldn’t afford to fix that window. I thought I would freeze to death. Fortunately, hot coffee was available in the vending machines in the building lobby. I learned to drink coffee out of a desire for self preservation. The coffee drinking habit continues until this day. If you like coffee as much as me, you may be surprised to discover that your coffee drinking habit can be an asset to your garden.

The most recent statistic that I have seen indicated that 56% of adults in America drink coffee. That results in a lot of coffee grounds being produced annually. Much of these go into the trash can and then into landfills. A far better use of coffee grounds, however, is in the garden.

Coffee grounds can be just what you need to make great compost. In order to make good compost you need the correct combination of ingredients. First, you need “browns.” These materials are high in carbon and usually include things like straw and fallen leaves from our shade trees. The microbes that break down these materials require a certain amount of nitrogen. That is one of the reasons we need to add “greens” to the pile. Greens include materials like spent vegetable plants, grass clippings, and kitchen scraps. If we don’t add enough greens the browns will break down slowly—if they break down at all. For example, fill a compost bin with only fallen leaves and it will sit for weeks or months with very little decomposition taking place. Unfortunately, “greens” can be in short supply during the winter months.

The carbon to nitrogen ratio of coffee grounds is about 20:1. That is about the same as grass clippings. In other words, coffee grounds are an ideal nitrogen source for the compost bin. Most sources recommend that you do not add over 25% coffee grounds to your compost pile. I doubt many folks will be able to generate that many grounds at home. Some gardeners, however, collect grounds from neighborhood restaurants and coffee shops. You can collect a lot of grounds in a relatively short period of time from commercial sources.

Coffee grounds contain about 2% nitrogen. Grounds contain much lower levels of phosphorus and potash. You can add the grounds to soil under plants as an organic fertilizer material. Coffee grounds also contain a fairly high level of sulfur. That means that they will help to acidify the soil over time. That makes them an excellent material for fertilizing acid loving plants like azaleas and blueberries. Coffee grounds can be used to change the color of old fashioned pink hydrangeas as well. Spread your grounds under the plant and it will slowly acidify the soil resulting in blue blossoms forming.

There are a few basic precautions to take when using coffee grounds in the garden. Obviously, plants can be damaged if the grounds are spread when they are still piping hot. Also, while the grounds compost readily, the filters may break down very slowly. Spent coffee filters blowing across the landscape are not particularly inviting! Finally, thick layers of coffee grounds tend to cake and form a hard crusty layer.

When used in moderation coffee grounds can really perk up your compost pile and your acid loving plants. Maybe your plants would like a cup of Java in the morning too!